

CANBERRA SCHOOL OF ART
GRADUATE DIPLOMA REPORT
1986

KEITH MILLER
SCULPTURE

CONTENTS

A.	INTRODUCTION	...	...	1.
B.	THE WORK	...	...	3.
C.	SUMMARY OF THE YEAR	...	...	9.
D.	SLIDES	...	...	11.
E.	CURRICULUM VITAE	...	...	12.

A. INTRODUCTION

In a nutshell my general intention has been to explore steel as a material useful in investigating some new (to me) and varying visual ideas.

When I finished the degree course at the Canberra School of Art in 1983 I had gone through the steel mill so to speak. I had reached the stage where I was very interested in the nature of the material (steel) itself and its use in expressing ideas other than that of the formalist constructed genre. The latter I felt was an area where with a deft touch of the welding rod, things could be arranged and fastened to slide, fall, spin, swerve, curve, collapse rise up and go over, hover, pivot and stand still in a slow, fast medium pace contained or non contained manner. I thought that pursuing the plastic nature of steel could be more exciting.

The next two years were spent away from art working full time in sport. The never ending doodling of ideas for what may come again and the observing of a number of visual splendours triggered off this years' journey.

My work this year has generally covered 3 areas :-

1. The use of steel fragments welded together to realize ideas away from a formalist arrangement of pieces.
2. Manipulation, and the putting together of steel elements to create a "modelled" mass of steel. In this regard away from the use of steel as plate.
3. Other ideas that have arisen during the year, particularly wall pieces.

A few further points need to be made before discussing the work.

Firstly the divisions I have made between the 3 areas of work are to a certain extent arbitrary. There are obvious differences but as well there are areas of similarity. Some of the latter will be discussed during the text.

The second point concerns my working method. I have not attempted to put the work in any chronological order as I work on a number of pieces at the same time and nearly always leave a piece unfinished for some time before returning to complete the work.

In regard to the material, my original intention was not to just work in steel. But as time went by I became rather obsessed with pushing the material in different directions. Further to this was the fact that for my purpose steel was preferred because of its strength and convenience of construction and permanency in a exterior environment.

Finally two points which I guess have something to do with my philosophy about sculpture. I believe very much in the physicality of sculpture and have a strong desire for a finished work to have a life of more than a passing moment or flavour. That is, a sense of visual permanency as against theatre or fashion.

The other point is that my work is more than therapy. I find no purpose in making sculpture just for myself. I do care that people other than those in the bog of avant garde aesthetics, gain something from the presence of my work.

B. THE WORK1. Sculptures using Steel Fragments(a) Intentions and Influences

The challenge was to use steel pieces and shapes almost in a painterly fashion to represent some idea which was not inherently a formalist arrangement of pieces. So, fired by such visual delicacies as Van Gogh's work, Canberra's great autumn patterns, stained glass, mosaics and countless paintings rich with colour, I thought of the possibility of welding fragments together to create sculptures made of particles of colour.

(b) The Sculptures - Realization(i) Autumn

The first idea was simply to build what could be called the internal structure of a well defined shape, in this case a broken segment of a rectangular slab.

The intention was to control the parameters of the construction so there would be a shape and a controlled depth of particled colour. In a sense a combination of structure and colour.

The structure was originally built standing on its end but seemed too much of an object. I turned it over to the more horizontal position so that it took on more of a painterly quality.

There was a conscious effort to have a reasonably overall evenness allowing the later use of colour and tone to pick out distinctive elements.

Autumn colours were always a primary consideration as the original spark for this type of work was a mass of photos taken of a Canberra autumn a few years ago.

The transformation of the piece into colour was exciting and the process was a revelation of tonal and colour values.

(ii) Flinders Street 5.05

I wanted to develop further the use of welded fragments into a pictorial wall piece, the elements to symbolize a particular human activity. In this case Flinders Street in Melbourne after work. I have liked John Brack's work over the years - his use of inanimate objects to symbolize other things is exciting and clever.

Originally the bits and pieces were quickly thrown down on the floor and even though I was always contemplating a work as outlined above, I hadn't discounted the possibility of just a composition of coloured shapes.

I settled on Flinders Street as such a theme offered a strong visual thought process on which to attach the work. Further to this I felt that such a theme presented a challenge in setting up a varying speed of movement amongst the pedestrians, via the structure and colour. It did.

(c) Technique and Materials

Fragments and pieces of mild steel were cut and found, welded together and ground back in the case of "Autumn" using a small disc grinder and die grinder.

The works were then sandblasted, undercoated with metal primer and overpainted with matt, satin and gloss enamel paint via spray and brush.

2. Modelling in Steel

(a) Intentions and Influences

This has been a natural progression from my previous manipulation of sheet steel. It has been a continuation of the exploration of steel as a plastic material by building mass singular forms out of steel.

I can recall that some years ago I saw a couple of pieces by David Wilson and I realized then the possibilities of steel.

Even though the theme of disintegration from a recognizable form is pretty obvious, I wanted the bulk of each work to develop without too much planning, the latter of which I have been a victim for longer than I care to remember.

So the exciting potential was :-

- (i) The physicality of this type of work both in process and finish.
- (ii) The process - the work was going to lead me in its making.

(b) The Sculptures - Realization

There are seven pieces in all ranging from "Adelaide, February" which is very much akin to what I was doing in my last year at Art School, to the final piece "The Monolith Tears".

The basic theme of these works is disintegration and change, generally from a recognizable geometric form. The underlying suggestion is that great forces are at play.

I do not entirely know why the theme of change plays such a big part in not only this work but in a lot of the other work I have done. Even though I wanted the work to develop as I went along, there are no doubt feelings about individual and worldly matters in this work. With the gift of hindsight I can see not only strong physical images in this work but also suggestions of other symbolic notions particularly in "The Monolith Tears". I am not going to attempt to write about this because I am not sure in my mind entirely what these notions are.

Before arriving at this latter deep water, I increasingly became aware of some other influences.

I am excited by the great physicality of sculpture. I very much like physical dynamic things and it is no mere coincidence that I have been heavily involved in sport for most of my life. I sometimes think that this partly explains my initial attraction to sculpture as a refugee from war torn painting on one fine interview day.

About halfway through the year I revisited a number of books on Francis Bacon, whose work has always interested me. Somewhere in my work is the disfiguration influence of Bacon.

A final influence was more of a negative reaction to a type of sculpture that eludes me. I cannot come to grips with the type of work that consists of a lot of bits and pieces that are no doubt aesthetically placed in relation to each other but to me are cluttered garbage. I presume they mean something to the maker. This nonsense pushed me further to mass the pieces into singular forms.

I found this work got my adrenalin pumping as I was not sure of where I was heading. The work got stronger and more physical as I went along and the process, albeit tiring, became more exciting as I discovered new techniques. The great step forward for me was letting the work build up in my hands, determining its own course to a large extent.

(c) Technique and Materials

The work evolved out of steel shapes which were welded together, manipulated, cut and ground into solid looking forms.

I painted only "Adelaide, February" mainly because it is very linear and thought it would work better with colour.

With the others I worked the rusted surfaces with heat and steel wire brushing, to create a strong metallic look. Floor, boot and car polish and colouring were used to create a varied tonal and textural finish to the works. A final coat of fish oil was applied to seal the surfaces.

3. Wall Pieces

The pictorial nature of wall pieces appeals to me. The ability to survey shapes is enhanced on the wall, and the dynamic qualities of pattern and design can be more easily read.

"A Day in the Life" was another opportunity to utilize the plastic quality of steel with a variety of shapes both bought and manipulated.

The intention was to create a Escher in steel the metamorphose of steel shapes originally being reinforced by changes in colour and tone. However I discarded applied colour and reverted to a stronger visual feel for the material using heat sandblasting and wire brush. Again there is an attempt at a merging of pure physical image and suggestions of whatever the viewer wants to perceive as some kind of symbolism.

"Escape" simply came about as a composition of disintegration, a light relief, if you excuse the pun, from my modelled work and a pictorial answer to the latter. The colour used is acrylic house paint spray.

C. SUMMARY OF THE YEAR

Art is about learning, of finding ways of creating visual images and using that knowledge and the questions it raises for further work.

Given that for every answer a hundred more questions arise what have been the benefits of this year?

My attitude towards art is always to the fore. It runs the full range from black and white dogma to the egalitarian anything is justified. From this haze I cannot deny that this year has seen my thoughts reinforced as to the use of steel as a material. Of all the great things that can be created with this material I remain totally detached from cluttered sculpture the components of which create some kind of intellectual aesthetic that I am too stupid to comprehend.

Give me shapes and forms that can be singularly and collectively seen. It is the shape or image that draws the eye before the mind can fatten. This to me is the guts of sculpture. I cannot literally see shapes in cluttered sculpture.

Now that I have that out of my system I will review the practical achievements.

Firstly, a greater knowledge of the manipulation and use of steel and hence more confidence in working with it.

Secondly, a clearer understanding of steel as a vehicle for developing ideas away from a mere formalist arrangement of pieces.

Thirdly, and in some ways the most important achievement, allowing the work to evolve without too much conscious planning.

Trying to be honest with myself and not doing pretentious crap that knowingly might appeal to certain people has also been important to me this year.

Two final points. I am convinced that making art is more than therapy. There must be a balance between the purpose of the work for the maker and for a wide audience.

The final point is that this whole year has given me the incentive to press on with my sculpture in the future. This is without doubt the greatest benefit of this opportunity, and I am grateful.

D. SLIDES

(All measurements are Length x Height x Depth and are in centimetres)

1. Autumn
Painted Mild Steel
1830 x 810 x 130
2. Flinders St 5.05
Painted Mild Steel
2500 x 1900
3. Adelaide, February
Painted Mild Steel
790 x 900 x 230
4. The Monolith Tears
Mild Steel
700 x 1500 x 320
5. Summer I
Mild Steel
430 x 490 x 320
6. Summer II
Mild Steel
300 x 500 x 220
7. Summer III
Mild Steel
280 x 1340 x 210
8. Summer IV
Mild Steel
1070 x 350 x 420
9. Summer V
Mild Steel
1110 x 800 x 350
10. A Day in the Life
Mild Steel
1550 x 1600
11. Escape
Painted Mild Steel
1600 x 1820

E. CURRICULUM VITAE

- 1953 Born, Cohuna, Victoria.
- 1980 - 83 B.A. (Visual) Canberra School of Art.
- 1984 - 86 Part Time Sculpture Teacher (LINK)
 Canberra School of Art.
- 1986 Graduate Diploma Canberra School of Art.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1983 Final Year Student Show
 Canberra School of Art.
- 1984 Playhouse Gallery A.C.T.
- 1984 Invited Sculptors
 Irving Gallery Sydney.